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Rebels do little fighting inside Nicaragua

By Rod Nordland
Inquirer Staff Writer

BARRA DE COLORADO, Costa Rica — Anti-communist Nicaraguan guerrillas under the command of Eden Pastora appear now to be in complete control of the Rio Colorado.

There is one problem: The Rio Colorado lies completely within Costa Rica, which says it is neutral in the Nicaraguan conflict — one of many indications that Pastora's Nicaraguan guerrillas are doing precious little fighting inside Nicaragua.

Pastora's guerrillas of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance — known by its Spanish abbreviation, ARDE — also control a long section of the Rio San Juan, which forms the border between the countries, and an unknown amount of trackless jungle on the Nicaraguan side. But they do it, judging from a recent trip there, mainly from bases on the Costa Rican side of the border.

In fact, many of Pastora's guerrillas are not Nicaraguans but

Costa Ricans and a few Panamanians sympathetic with the guerrillas' cause.

The Costa Ricans deny giving any support to Pastora's anti-Sandinista guerrillas and contend they do not allow them to operate on Costa Rican territory. But the guerrillas whom a group of journalists accompanied on a five-day trip operated openly, demonstrating not only that they are greatly dependent on Costa Rica as a supply and support base but also that they use Costa Rica as a sanctuary during counterattacks.

The group of seven journalists was expecting a long, arduous trip from the Costa Rican capital, first by jeep and then on foot, to the border area where Pastora operates. After all, the Costa Ricans have said that the area is too rugged for them to patrol or control. Other journalists, on earlier trips, have reported walking for a week to reach Pastora's camps.

The group made contact with an ARDE representative in San Jose

and were taken to the movement's clandestine safe house there, where mimeograph machines and photocopiers fed a growing pile of anti-Sandinista literature in the corner. An ARDE videotape, of the type offered to TV journalists, was shown, featuring Pastora training his guerrillas "deep inside Nicaragua."

"You'll have to write it better than this," said ARDE deputy director Alvaro Jerez, "but we use Costa Rica for logistic purposes, not for military purposes."

Jerez, along with a number of other top ARDE leaders, is a defector from the Sandinista regime. A neurosurgeon, he was a member of the revolutionary government's Council of State. ARDE director Alfonso Robelo originally represented the business community on the three-man ruling Sandinista junta. And Pastora himself is an authentic Sandinista war hero, who as Commander Zero was the effective leader of the southern front in the war against dictator Anastasio Somoza.

From the safe house, the journalists were taken to Tobias Bolanos International Airport, a small airport just outside San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, where a twin-engine Piper was waiting.

Welcoming party

About 30 minutes later, the plane touched down at a rough asphalt strip here in Barra de Colorado, which is where the Rio Colorado empties into the Caribbean Sea. Members of the Costa Rican Rural Guards — the nation's paramilitary police force in the countryside — were expecting the party, and they greeted the journalists warmly, checked their names and ushering them to a boat landing next to their command post.

"Watch out for the *pedicoacoes*," one of the guards said, using an Indian vulgarism that has become the guerrillas' pejorative for the Sandinistas, as we set out on an outboard-powered long boat.

The group was accompanied on this first leg by two Pastora guerrillas and by ARDE propaganda official Pachelli Chamorro.

Chamorro was ebullient, standing up in the boat and making a sweeping motion with his arm. "We control this entire river," he said. He said it was the Rio San Juan, and the town on the opposite, northern, shore was San Juan del Norte, a Sandinista stronghold at the mouth of the Rio San Juan.

To show how brazen and strong his forces were, Chamorro told the boatman to veer close to the Sandinista shore of "San Juan del Norte."

Boat unchallenged

"They all hate the *pedicoacoes* here," he said. It seemed odd that no one challenged the reporters, but then the flags flying in this town were Costa Rican, not Nicaraguan — and that the town was Barra de Colorado Norte, not San Juan del Norte, and that the river was the Colorado, not the San Juan, which lay much farther north. We did not, however, debate the point.

Along the deep, wide, gently curving river, bordered by jungles and swamps, the boat passed houses where ARDE guerrillas first challenged it, then waved it on. It stopped at Cano Madre, at least 10 miles from Nicaraguan territory, where the guerrillas had a base camp.

Inside a newly built, wood and tin-roof shack on the river bank was a stash of U.S.-made military gear, all of it brand new and marked with the "U.S." stamp. There were sophisticated military radios; green Army-issue T-shirts, along with socks, underwear and fatigues; jungle hammocks and ponchos; U.S.-made semi-automatic rifles with night scopes; canteens, web belts and machine-gun belts, and storage batteries for the radios. Outside, clattering loudly in the night, was a gasoline-powered generator that drove the battery chargers and the television set. A few hundred yards away, in the jungle, an ammunition dump was hidden under tarps.

The guerrilla escorts, who now numbered six, insisted that we were inside Nicaragua, although it was clear that the boat was still inside Costa Rica.

The television set entertained everyone with "Kojak" in Spanish until the generator went off. Late at night,

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